



Introduction: Why Storytelling?

*'The food we eat makes our bodies and the stories we hear make our minds'.
(Wright, 1995)*

Stories and storytelling are central to our lives and lie at the heart of human experience. Since the beginning of time we have shared through stories the events, beliefs and values that make us who we are and form our families, communities and cultures. Some of these stories have been collected in myth and documented in fables and legends, some have become literary classics and others have become stories passed on orally through the generations.

Storytelling, as used today, often refers to an interactive experience between a teller and a listener. Among the techniques and methodologies available to the teacher, storytelling is one of the most frequently used teaching methodologies and is an established part of the *Revised Primary School Curriculum (1999)*. Story is one of the five principal contexts through which oral language can be approached. The importance of story is explored in the Teacher Guidelines for English, pgs.45-47.

The educational value of using stories and storytelling as a teaching methodology is undisputed. Anyone who has ever told a child a story will testify to the capacity of a story to capture a child's attention and engage his/her imagination. Most children adore listening to stories in their mother tongue and understand the process and the narrative conventions. This explains why storytelling is such a valuable tool in the modern language class. They provide an ideal introduction to the modern language as the language is presented in a context that is non-threatening and familiar to the child. As Tierney and Dobson (1995, p.1) note 'in the early stages of learning a foreign language, it is easier to listen and understand than to read and understand, particularly when the story is accompanied by gestures and mime and pictures are used to illustrate what is being said'.

Storytelling is a superb methodology in the modern language classroom for the communicative approach and in keeping with the *NCCA Draft Modern Language Curriculum (1999)*, serves as a platform to develop the two other strands of the modern language curriculum - language awareness and cultural awareness. Language is presented in a familiar and memorable context and many stories contain natural repetition of key vocabulary and structures enabling the child to join in reading key taglines and phrases. Storytelling can involve receptive skills and can also serve to practise productive skills as the stories may be used as a springboard for practising reading, speaking, writing and listening activities. Please refer to the MLPSI's CPD Module 4 *Language Awareness and Integrating the Modern Language with Literacy, Oracy and Numeracy* for additional information and materials on developing language awareness and literacy in the modern language class.

Benefits of Using Storytelling in the modern language Class:

Stories can:

- enhance childrens' motivation to learn the modern language by stimulating their imaginations and their involvement in the storytelling process
- help children to look at life from different viewpoints and imagine what it feels like to be someone else
- link to other subjects in the curriculum and present opportunities for cross curricular integration
- help children to develop their thinking skills
- provoke a shared response thereby developing pupils' social skills
- facilitate the acquisition and revision of vocabulary and structures. Most of the new language in stories is perfectly contextualised and it is usually repeated more than once so that the listener has more than one opportunity to understand the meaning
- enhance the development of the child's literary competence i.e. the child's ability to understand and enjoy literature
- help to develop children's intercultural awareness through their experience of culturally specific stories. A carefully selected story can give information about life in the target country.
- improve pupils' pronunciation through an enhanced awareness of the rhythm and intonation of the modern language
- promote communicative exchange between the storyteller and his/her audience by inviting the audience to collaborate in predicting the end of the story, composing an alternative ending and giving a summary of the story to that point
- develop pupils' appreciation of a variety and range of accents through listening to stories on CDs/DVDs

Stories can be:

- motivating, challenging, interesting, enjoyable and fun
- promote the development of listening skills including listening for gist which involves listening for the main idea or plot without necessarily understanding everything. Other skills such as listening for specific information can also be developed through stories
- excellent for catering for pupils of different learning styles including visual, auditory, kinaesthetic etc. and also for the different types of intelligence including emotional, linguistic, interpersonal etc.
- an ideal platform to develop pupils' language awareness as through stories pupils become aware of language patterns

Sources of stories:

- Storybooks in the target language including Big books etc.
- Comics in the target language
- You Tube
- DVDs
- Newspapers/magazines from the target language
- Guests from the target culture(s)
- Websites
- Trócaire, Oxfam and Ireland Aid for stories and pictures relating to target cultures
- Adapt existing stories
- Create own stories

Choosing Stories:

The type of story you choose will depend on the skills you are trying to develop in the pupils, for example listening for gist, learning specific vocabulary, revising particular language structures etc. However, the following points may serve as useful guidelines:

- Traditional or well-known children's stories are a good starting point for storytelling. Folk stories, fairy tales, legends and fables are a good place to start as the children may know the stories in their native language and this will help them to understand it when re-told in the modern language.
- It might also be useful to choose a story that relates to the topic you have just covered in the modern language classroom, for example *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* is useful for practising vocabulary associated with food.
- Create your own story using one of the many digital storytelling tools or adapt a story by devising your own text to suit your pupils' age and interest levels.
- Choose stories with a good storyline that is age appropriate. There are lots of humorous children's books in the target language that are very appealing to the senior classes.
- Create your own stories in big book format or using PowerPoint. Encourage pupils to create their own stories and allow them to tell their stories to younger classes during paired reading or Book Week.
- Try and choose books with a lot of repetition - pupils love to chorus the tagline and this also helps to retain their attention during the storytelling.
- Choose books with colourful illustrations which support pupils' understanding of the text.



- Create a section in your class or school library for modern language books and encourage pupils from different countries to bring in stories in their mother tongues.
- Use a variety of formats and media to present the stories - there are several excellent websites that offer stories electronically with accompanying sound files and images. Big books are also a terrific way to present a story to a class as the text and images are visible to all pupils.

When selecting storybooks teachers should consider:

Vocabulary/structure/functions: is the language accessible for the age group you are teaching? Does the story reinforce or revise language?

Stories that begin with 'Once upon a time...' are frequently written in the simple past tense. Many teachers are apprehensive about introducing children to this tense in the early stages of their modern language learning. It is important to remember, however, that children will focus not on the use of tense but rather on the meaning of the story. Their prior knowledge and experience of storytelling will, to a certain extent, have prepared them for its use in the target language.

The quality of literary devices: such as repetition, rhythm, humour, predictability, surprise etc. How do these devices contribute to pupils' enjoyment and comprehension?

Content/subject matter: will pupils be interested in the story? Is the subject matter relevant to their age and experiences? Is there a good storyline with a sense of climax?

Illustrations/layout: Do the illustrations enhance pupils' understanding? Are they attractive and visual and large enough for the class to see? In the case of culturally-specific storybooks, are the illustrations representative of the target culture(s)?

Cross-curricular integration/linkage: does the story offer opportunities for cross-curricular integration and/or linkage? Does it link to any of the *My ELP* topics?

Please see the rubric entitled 'Considerations When Selecting Storybooks' for further guidelines.

Telling the Story:

In order for storytelling to be an effective vehicle for teaching the modern language, the teacher must bring a strong performance element to the telling of stories. The teacher must learn to dramatise the story so as to make it engaging and interesting to all of the language learners in the classroom. It is advised that the teacher practise telling the story a number of times before presenting it in the classroom. Teachers can dramatise the action and engage pupils in a number of ways:

- by varying the pitch, volume and tempo of the voice
- by using mime and facial gestures



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- by maintaining eye contact with the pupils
- by making the best use of the space
- by using different voices for different characters
- by using silence and pauses to add dramatic effect

Creating a story box for the modern language:

A story box for the modern language can contain samples of the following:

- authentic storybooks from the target culture(s)
- storybooks in Irish/English that can be translated into the target language
- everyday objects etc. that can be used as props to tell stories
- masks/puppets/shadow puppets
- objects for making sound effects e.g. sheet of cardboard for thunder; tin filled with beads for rain effects
- pictures/visuals to support the stories

Bibliography:

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Ellis, G. and Brewster, J. (2002) *Tell It Again! The New Storytelling Handbook for Primary Teachers Book*, Longman, Harlow.

Tierney, D. And Dobson, P. (1995) *Are you sitting comfortably? - Telling stories to young language learners*, CILT, London.

Wright, A. (1995) *Storytelling with children*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.